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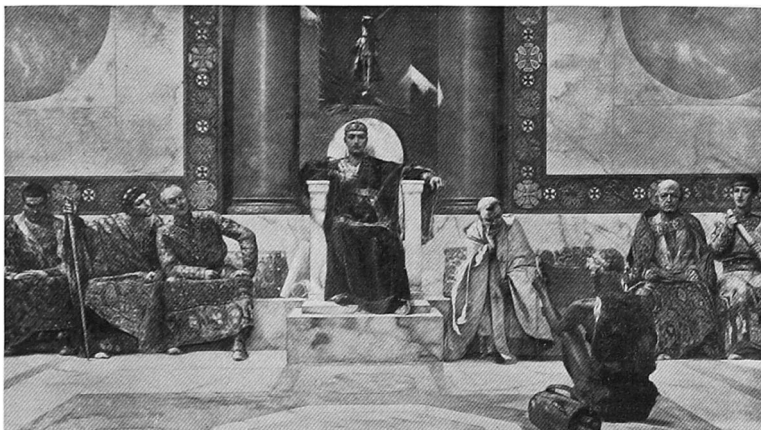
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THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

THE ART OF BENJAMIN-CONSTANT

The death of J. J. Benjamin-Constant, on the 27th of May last, removed from the art world of Paris one of its celebrities. During his artistic life he may be said to have played four distinct rôles, and in three of them he achieved remarkable success. He first made a reputation as a brilliant painter of Oriental subjects, which he relinquished for the more remunerative career of a successful portrait-artist. At about the same time he began to gain prominence as one of the favorite art instructors of Paris. He had likewise executed a few important mural decorations, when ill health and finally death stayed his hand.

He was essentially a painter. His pictures showed no lack of literary interest, but they were painted primarily for the joy of painting. He was the most brilliant colorist in all his generation of French artists, and he possessed the talent and skill which are the birthright of most French painters in a surprising degree.

His skill was devoid of trickery, which may not be truthfully said of the skill of such men as Fortuny and Madrazo of the Spanish school, Boldini of the Italian, or Makart of the Austrian. His methods were always "legitimate," but there were few subtleties of brush work which were not revealed to him.

While he received most of his art instruction in the Atelier Cabanel at the École des Beaux Arts, he was the pupil of Rembrandt more than of any other master. His painting of flesh had often the "fatness" and firmness noticeable in most of the work of the great

van Ryn. The peculiar technique obtained by dragging one tone of a color over another, or one color over another, is identical in many instances in the painting of both. The modern artist, however, seemed to strive to obtain brilliancy of effect through variety of color and through the contrast of varied textures more often than his seventeenth-century master. In this he was signally successful.



J. J. BENJAMIN-CONSTANT
From a Photograph

Benjamin-Constant's early travels in Spain and Morocco are responsible for a fondness for splendor and brilliancy of effect which was the "motive" of his Oriental subjects, and which persisted in his decorative painting and in his portraiture. The rich velvets, satins, and cloth of gold in the costumes of his Oriental figures are found again in the mediæval figures of his decorations for the Capitol in Toulouse, and in the backgrounds and accessories of his portraits.

The tendency of his earlier work was directed by the examples of Gérôme and the older French Orientalists, and of his immediate predecessor in the Atelier Cabanel, Henri Regnault. The masterpiece



MME. J. VON DERWIES
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

of his Oriental period is "Les Chérifas." In the golden half-light and luminous shadow of a harem, decorated with the richest of stuffs and objects of Oriental art, are grouped a half-dozen nude and half-draped figures of women. It is a superb example of purely constructive art, an ideal subject realistically treated with the utmost skill. It failed, however, to win the medal of honor which the artist afterwards received for his portrait of his son, one of the simplest pieces of painting which he ever produced. It is in these two pictures that the great lesson of his artistic career is summed up. Wealth and popular fame were won by his work, which was the distinguished product of talent combined with scientific training; but it was

the work which showed heart and soul, or whatever you may wish to call that spontaneous quality which arouses sympathetic feeling, which won him the greatest honor his fellow-artists could bestow upon him.

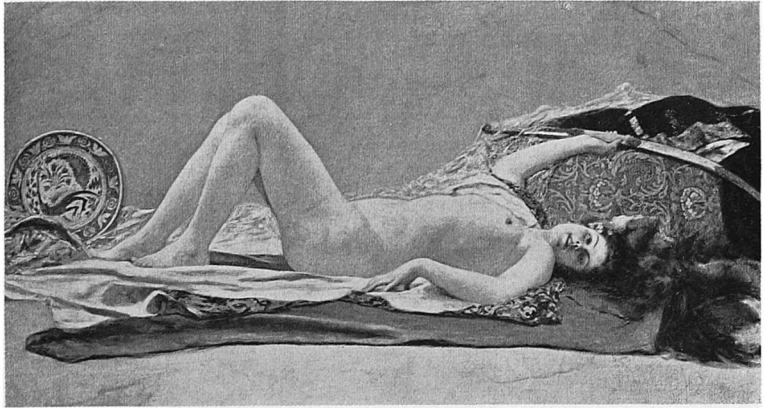
While it cannot be said that his paintings of Oriental subjects were devoid of spontaneity, it was their ostentatious cleverness and the sustained effort of a well-trained mind which imposed admiration rather than charmed one into a state of sympathetic approval. They were stunning, and even fascinating, but they lacked the captivating charm which takes permanent hold of one's senses.

Curiously enough, the artist's personality showed many qualities which did not find much expression in his painting. His nature was in reality a sympathetic one. He was beloved by nearly all of his pupils. Although he was born in Paris, he spent his childhood with two aunts in Toulouse, and he always preserved the expansive temperament and the rich accent of the Midi. He was fond of humor, and his language was full of it and of picturesque-ness. He was most industrious and temperate in his habits—almost abstemious in the use of liquor and tobacco. He detested laziness or carelessness in his pupils, but was generous in his encouragement of even the untalented who showed a desire to advance.

His first appearance as an art instructor was in the studio in which he had been a pupil. M. Cabanel was confined to his home

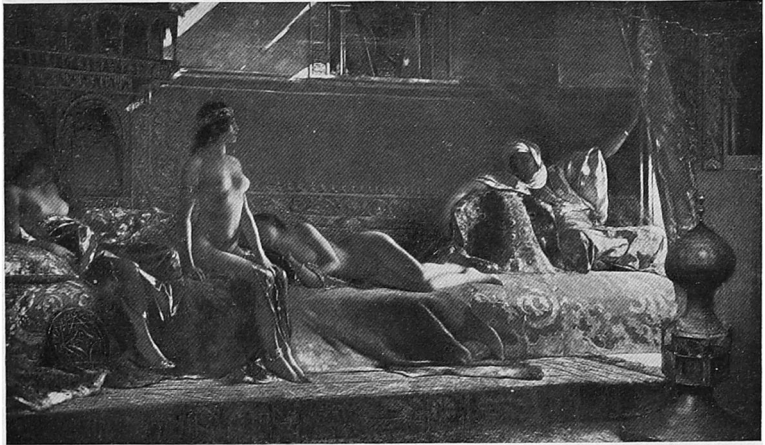


PORTRAIT OF MISS AUSTIN
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

**VICTRIX**

By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

by his last illness, when one day a middle-aged man, having more the air of a physician, with his trim beard and eye-glasses, than of an artist, entered the studio and proceeded to remove his hat and overcoat. A *nouveau*, possessing a voice like a trumpet's and a brogue unmistakably Toulousian, shouted, "Who is this man, this intruder?" A smile flitted over his features as Benjamin-Constant announced that

**LES CHERIFAS**

By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

the illness of M. Cabanel had made the provision of a substitute necessary, and that for a time the pupils would receive criticism from a comrade instead of their master.

A few months later an English promoter induced him to establish a school near his studio in the Impasse Helène, in the Clichy Quarter of Paris. Here he introduced regulations more strict than are usually imposed upon the pupils of art schools. He argued that in schools of law or medicine such regulations were a necessity, and that an art school should be benefited by them. Loud talking, singing, noise, and smoking were prohibited during the pose of the model. A fair test of these regulations was never obtained, as a few months later the English promoter became involved financially, and the school was relinquished for a professorship in the Julian Academy.

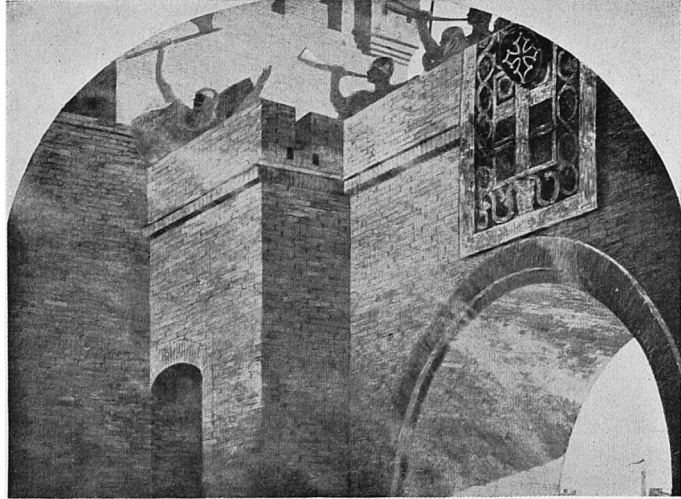
At the time of his death, the studio instructed by Benjamin-Constant and

Jean Paul Laurens was the largest and in all respects the leading one of this famous art school, if not of all Paris. In many other ways his influence upon the art of his time was felt. He was frequently called to act as a juror at the Salon, as judge of the work



JUDITH
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

of the pupils of the government schools, and in making reports upon matters of art. He was ever faithful in performing such duties.



ENTRY OF POPE URBAN II.
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

This side of his career is not generally appreciated here. In America he is tabulated and pigeonholed by art lecturers as a brilliant painter of Oriental subjects and a portraitist who made several visits

to New York and to London. He is not generally known as a painter of the nude, except as an adjunct to his Oriental interiors. His "Orpheus" is a superb example of the nude in landscape; "Victrix" and "Judith" are examples of pure virtuosity in the painting of the nude. For a time the similarity of Byzantine splendor to Oriental attracted him, and "Theodora" and "Justinian" were produced. In decoration he was at his best in the mediæval subjects for Toulouse. He professed a strong distaste for impressionism, but in his "Paris Convoking the Nations" he made use of impressionistic methods of painting.

In summing up his career as an artist, one finds much that is contradictory. He knew more than almost any modern artist of the *métier* of painting, and yet his masterpiece in the Luxembourg gallery is cracking



URBAN II. (Detail)
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

to pieces from the use of unsound pigments; his pictures are finished works of art, but unsatisfying. He was bold, but rarely daring, and he never transgressed the laws of the cultivated sense of artistic propriety with which his academic training had provided him.

Benjamin-Constant's fame as a portrait-painter dates from his first visit to America. He was one of the first of the French artists of repute to visit this country in a professional capacity, and the reputation he had acquired as a subject painter almost immediately secured him important commissions. Speaking a couple of years ago of this new departure in his art, he said:

"It is America which made me a portrait-painter. Until I went there I was almost solely a painter of subject pictures. I had made one or two attempts at portraiture, which I had not deemed satisfac-



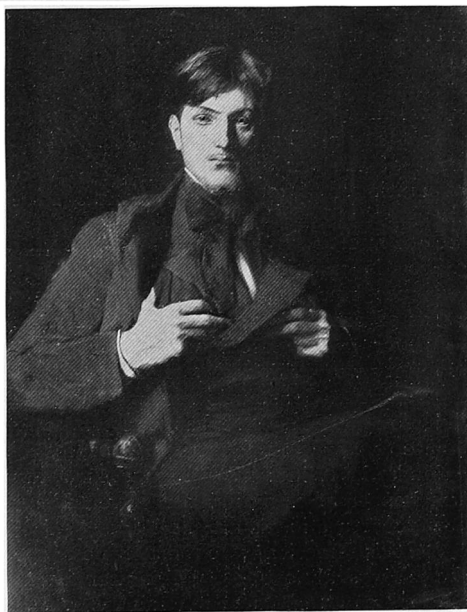
BLACK DIAMONDS
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

and devoting himself almost exclusively during the latter years of his life to portraiture. Certainly he had patrons whose wealth would naturally make it an object to any man to cultivate this branch of the art.

Among the likenesses by which Benjamin-Constant is best known are those of M. Chaplain, the great medalist, his two sons, André and Emanuel, and his other portrait of one of his sons, here, with reproduced, which made him a medalist;

tory. I need not tell you that I was received in the United States with the most exquisite courtesy. And little by little I acquired confidence in myself, and portrait-painting soon became more interesting to me than anything else."

It was the good fortune of the artist to secure as sitters for portraits Jay Gould, Bradley Martin, Anthony Drexel, Frederick Ayer, and several other wealthy Americans, and it is more than likely that the remuneration he received as a portraitist may have had much to do with his abandoning Oriental subjects



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S SON
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant
Picture that won Salon Medal

the Duc d'Aumale, M. Maurel, Madame Benjamin-Constant, the Grand Duchess Paul of Mecklenburg, Madame Calvé, the Princess Radziwell, Queen Victoria, Sir Julian Pauncefote, Queen Alexandra, Madame Emile Fourton, Madame von Derwies, Madame Langier, M. de Blowitz, the Grand Duchess Serge, and the Duchess of Marlborough, daughter of W. K. Vanderbilt. These portraits, like all the rest of the artist's work, are very uneven in quality. He himself always regarded that of M. de Blowitz as one of the best his art had produced.

He was not a little piqued over the result of his Gould likeness.

This was ordered by the millionaire as a gift for his son George. The sitter displayed little interest in the work as it progressed, and when the picture was completed he gave it a scant two minutes of his time, drew his check in payment, and the incident was closed. The artist always thought that his painstaking efforts merited ampler recognition, some words at least of appreciation.

The outcome of his portrait of Victoria was scarcely less satisfactory; indeed, to the day of his death the painter never forgot a particular humiliation incident to this canvas. He was commissioned by Sir W. Ingram, proprietor and editor of the *London Illustrated News*, to paint the portrait, and the queen graciously consented to pose. The studies finished, he returned to Paris to complete the undertaking,

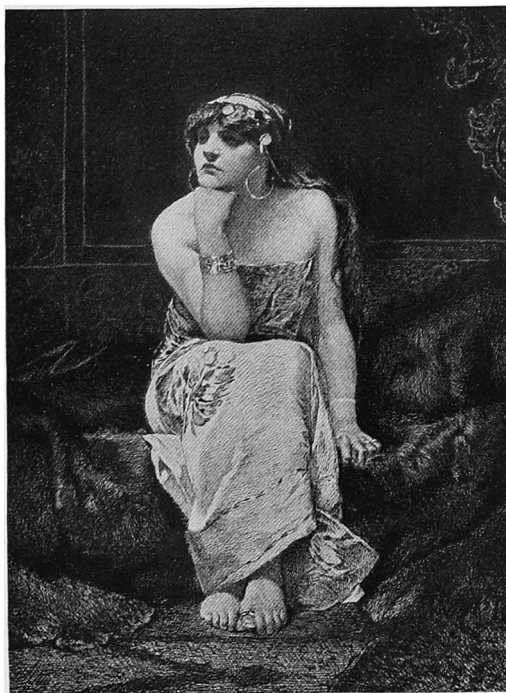


QUEEN VICTORIA
By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

fully conscious of the importance of the work. When the portrait was finished the queen criticised it rather sharply, and among other things found fault with a particular blue the artist had used. One day Benjamin-Constant received a communication from his royal sitter with an inclosure of a blue ribbon. He thought it was an honor that had been conferred upon him, whereas Victoria had simply sent

the ribbon to prove that the artist was off in his color, and that she was right in her criticism.

Despite the success Benjamin-Constant acquired as a portraitist, in the opinion of most critics his fame will ultimately rest on the Oriental subjects by which he first acquired reputation. These include such notable canvases as the following: "A Woman of the Riff Coast," 1873; "Prisoners in Morocco" and "Women of the Harem," 1875; "Entrance of Mahomet II. into Constantinople in 1453," 1876; "The Last of the Rebels," 1880; the much talked of "Chéri-



HERODIAS

By J. J. Benjamin-Constant

fas," 1884; "Justice in the Harem," 1885; the great "Justinian," which just missed the medal of honor of the Salon of 1886; the pathetic picture of Beethoven playing his "Moonlight Sonata," 1889; "Samson and Delilah," "La Soif," "Favorite of the Emir," "Herodias," "Judith," "La Vengeance du Chérif," "Le Jour des Funerailles," and "Victrix." Such of the artist's paintings as have been brought to this country have found ready sale at high prices. His famous "Justinian," doubtless one of the very best of his figure subjects, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

E. S. CAMERON.